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[10.1002/jaal.273](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/269)

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: [Merga M.K. (2014). Peer group and friend influences on the social acceptability of adolescent book reading. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 57(6), 472-482], which has been published in final form [here](#). This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

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# **Peer Group and Friend Influences on the Social Acceptability of Adolescent Book**

## **Reading.**

**Margaret K. Merga**

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**TT:** This paper explores recent findings about adolescents' attitudes toward reading books for recreation, and the impact of friends and the peer group on the perceived social acceptability of the practice.

## **Introduction**

Is book reading uncool for adolescents, and does it really matter? Research suggests that some teenagers perceive book reading as “uncool,” and that adolescent readers may wish to keep “a low profile” about their reading (Ipsos MORI, 2003, p. 7), with boys in particular likely to view book reading related to being a “nerd” (NLT, 2012, p. 20). On the other hand, while children's books have been published and marketed to children since the eighteenth century (Roxburgh, 2000), books are potentially becoming more socially acceptable, as commercial phenomena such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* have positioned books in the centre of youth culture over the last two decades. These book movements “encourage reading as social engagement” (Scharber, 2009, p. 433), and may do much to improve the social capital of the book. As a former English teacher, I wanted to explore the perceived social acceptability of books. Do students perceive book reading as an uncool pastime? Are students' receiving encouragement to read books from their friends and

peer group? Most importantly, do the answers to either of these questions actually correlate with students' reading attitudes and frequency?

This paper seeks to explore the current social status of recreational book reading in contemporary youth culture. Quantitative data from the n=520 students who participated in the *West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading* (WASABR) were analyzed to provide insight into the influence of friend encouragement, friend attitude, and the peer group attitude on adolescents' book reading frequency and attitudes.

## **Background**

Increasing rates of recreational book reading is a global priority. While reading is positively associated with higher literacy scores and reading achievement (OECD, 2010; Samuels & Wu, 2001, Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Clark & De Zoysa, 2011), adolescent engagement in recreational book reading is in decline (Maynard, Mackay and Smyth, 2008; Nippold, Duthie & Larsen, 2005; Nieuwenhuizen, 2001; Stedman 2009; OECD, 2010), with aliteracy a growing concern. Aliteracy is the state in which an individual has acquired the skill to read, but chooses not to. On average across OECD countries, 37% of students do not read for enjoyment at all (OECD, 2010). Nearly half of all Americans in later adolescence read no books for pleasure (NEA, 2007; IES, 2011). Earlier research suggests that levels of recreational reading in general are low in Australia, with only 24% of high school students enjoying the practice (Nieuwenhuisen, 2001), similar to earlier findings by Bunbury (1995) and Thompson (1987). Many Australian adolescents rank reading a book as a leisure activity with low appeal (Manuel, 2012). However, recent findings suggest that while Western Australian adolescents cannot be broadly characterized as avid book readers, the majority (64%) read books for recreation at least once a month (Merga, 2013a).

The term aliteracy can be deceptive; it can be argued that adolescents are reading every day, as they participate in social networking, texting, messaging, reading bus timetables and a number of other recreational and functional literacies. However, as fiction books are the text type most consistently associated with literacy benefit, it is important to distinguish between the benefits offered by text types. OECD findings suggest that “in most countries, students who read fiction for enjoyment are much more likely to be good readers” (2011, p. 100), and that “students who read newspapers, magazines and non-fiction books are better readers in many countries, although the effect of these materials on reading performance is not as much pronounced as the effect of fiction books” (p. 101). An IES study also found that, on a combined reading literacy scale, reading for information through sources such as the internet did not offer the same positive benefit as storybook and novel reading (Baer, Baldi, Ayotte & Green, 2007). There is increasing evidence to suggest that the cognitive processes involved in reading internet-based sources, is vastly different (Liu, 2005).

Peer influence is generally found to increase during adolescence in Western culture (Giedd, 2012). Research suggests that friends who enjoy reading, and who are open to discussing and recommending books, generally support the development and maintenance of positive attitudes toward reading (Partin & Gillespie, 2002; Bintz, 1993). Friend recommendations have been identified in international research as valuable to many teens (Rinehart, Gerlach, Wisell & Welker, 1998; Maynard et al., 2008; McKool, 2007). Much of the existing research suggests that friends have great influence on reading choices (Howard & Jin, 2007; Mansor et al., 2012; Hopper, 2005). Hughes-Hassell (2008) found that self-defined “readers” were more likely to have friends they believed to be readers, who encouraged them to read, than “non-readers” (p. 8). The direction of causality is not established: whether readers choose their friends on the basis of this common interest, if it is incidental, or if the common interest evolves through the influence of continued association, is unknown. In an

Australian study, making reading an important part of adolescents' social interactions and shared experience was found to be integral to promoting adolescent enjoyment of books (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001).

Research suggests that many students are not receiving friend or peer encouragement to read books, and that gender may influence this. Clarke, Osbourne and Akerman (2008) found that most of the UK students surveyed were unsure of whether or not their friends were readers, and most stated that their friends "did not encourage them to read" (p. 7). Girls may be more likely than boys to receive encouragement to read and have friends who read (Klauda, 2008). Boys may also be less likely to share reading with friends or family (Millard, 1997).

The attitudes of the peer group as a whole toward books may also impact on adolescents' attitudes toward recreational book reading, though research in this area is limited. Rinehart, Gerlach, Wisell and Welker (1998) found that indirect peer group valuing of a book or its film adaptation could promote engagement in reading. The study found that while adolescents valued these recommendations, some recommendations were indirect, such as an instance in which a student described "overhearing students talking about a book and from that indirect recommendation bought the book and read it" (p. 276). Similarly, "another student described reading *Jurassic Park* because he had not been able to see the movie and other kids were talking about it" (p. 276). Nieuwenhuisen (2001) found that some students read so that they wouldn't feel socially excluded from the Harry Potter phenomenon that had enamored their peer group.

Studies have often failed to differentiate between peer group values and friends' values, presenting them as interchangeable; Howard's paper *Peer group influences on avid teen readers* (2009) actually focuses on friend influences, not the influence of the peer group. This viewpoint is not uncommon; many sociological studies that claim to look at relationships

between adolescents and peer influence are often really focusing on “friend” influence (such as Hallinan & Williams, 1990). The difficulty with this approach lies in the fact that teens are influenced by their friends’ attitudes and values, but also by the crowd culture (Vrillas Bateman, 2003), whose attitudes and values may be different, and even in opposition to those of friends. While younger children are primarily influenced by “dyadic (two person) and small group relationships,” adolescents are also thought to be typically responsive to the broader peer crowd (2003, p. 46). The two groups may exert influence in opposition to each other, and thus must be examined discretely, rather than indiscriminately. In this paper, the class group at school constitutes a representative sample of the peer group. The relationship of the student with the class group, and whether the student viewed it as populated with friends, acquaintances, or antagonists, would be different for each class member, and was outside the scope of the study; students were asked to provide an overall response of class group attitude toward recreational book reading, and students seemed to be generally comfortable with providing this assessment.

Positioning friends and peers as a significant potential influence on adolescent readers is reflective of a social model of education. This model adopts George Herbert Mead’s view, which situates individuals’ conduct and experiences as the products of their interactions with the social group (Mead & Morris, 1934; Mead, 1925). This model is known as symbolic interactionism. Adolescents’ approach to recreational book reading can thus be viewed as a product of socialization to attribute values and meanings to recreational book reading as a leisure pursuit. The act of identifying as a “reader” may be a product of exposure to influential social agents such as parents, teachers, friends and the peer group.

## **The Study**

The WASABR was a mixed-method study undertaken in 2012. The research tools were a survey and a semi-structured interview schedule. The survey gathered primarily quantitative data, with some open fields for gathering supplementary qualitative data. This paper focuses on quantitative data from the WASABR survey.

## **Survey**

The WASABR survey could be completed online using Qualtrics survey software, or in paper form, with results subsequently entered into Qualtrics. All data stored were stored in Qualtrics on a cloud. The survey contained 41 questions. After the data collection phase for the study was completed, basic analysis was performed in Qualtrics to identify initial trends in the raw data. All subsequent analysis was supported by SPSS statistical software.

## **Method**

A pilot study was performed at a Perth metropolitan school in Term 3 of 2012. This resulted in minor changes being made to the research tools.

Twenty schools were recruited in Term 4 of 2012 to participate in the WASABR. The sampling approach I used to select schools ensured that the sample was as representative of the Western Australian demographic as possible. All data was gathered from high school students who provided consent from their parents and themselves. The final quantitative data set included n=520 survey respondents, with n=242 males and n=276 females participating (2 students withheld gender). Government and non-government schools, single-sex and co-educational schools, and Metropolitan Teaching Program (Band A) schools (which are also known as hard-to-staff schools) were all represented in the sample. While most participants came from “general” classes, students from Academic Extension Programs (AEP) and Gifted and Talented Programs (GATE) were also represented in the sample.

In most cases, one Year 8 and one Year 10 class participated from each school, with students all aged between 13 and 16 years. Student participation rates varied widely. As the primary researcher, I was solely responsible for all data collection and maintenance.

### **The Social Acceptability of Recreational Book Reading**

I wanted to explore the validity of the notion that books are “not cool,” rather than make an argument that recreational book reading is a “cool” pastime, as it is the notion of the “uncoolness” of book reading, which is said to be a barrier to adolescent engagement in the practice. Thus social acceptability, rather than popularity, was the focus of the study.

Students were asked to rank their agreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” in a 5-option Likert scale. Book reading was found to be generally socially acceptable. Only 9% of the students agreed with the statement “It is not cool to read books.” Less than a third remained neutral, with 60% of students disagreeing with the statement.

When the data were split for gender, girls were clearly stronger in their level of disagreement, with boys more neutral. However, it was noteworthy that the difference between boys and girls who agreed with the statement “It is not cool to read books” was small: 11% of boys and 7% of girls.

**Fig.1. Level of agreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” by gender**  
**(INSERT FIG. 1)**

To determine the social acceptability of recreational book reading, the whole group ranking was correlated with a question about recreational book reading frequency and a question about attitude toward recreational book reading. Correlation analysis looks to see if



there is a mutual relationship existing between two variables, and if that relationship exists, if this is a positive or negative relationship, with the strength of this relationship also quantified.

Reading frequency was determined by responses to the question “How often do you read books in your free time?” which was measured on a 7-option frequency scale. Reading attitude was determined by level of agreement with the statement “I like reading books in my free time,” which was measured on a 5-option Likert scale.

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. That stronger levels of disagreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” will appear in students who regularly read books for recreation.
2. That stronger levels of disagreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” will appear in students who like reading books.

I used Spearman’s Correlation Coefficient to determine the level of correlation between disagreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” and adolescents’ attitude toward, and regularity of engagement in recreational book reading. This revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between adolescent book reading frequency and a negative perception of book reading “coolness” ( $r_s[519] = -.354$ ). This represents a moderate negative correlation (Taylor, 1990), which suggests that adolescents who perceived reading as “uncool” were less likely to read in their free time. Thus the hypothesis that stronger levels of disagreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” will appear in students who regularly read books for recreation was supported by this dataset. Students who thought book reading was uncool appeared to read less.

The Spearman’s Correlation Coefficient also revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between adolescent attitude toward book reading and a negative perception of book reading “coolness” ( $r_s[515] = -.456$ ). This represents a moderate negative correlation (Taylor, 1990), which suggests that adolescents who view reading as “uncool”

were less likely to enjoy the practice. The hypothesis that stronger levels of disagreement with the statement “It is not cool to read books” will appear in students who like reading books was supported by this result. Students who thought book reading was uncool tended to also find book reading less enjoyable.

### **Friend Encouragement to Read**

To determine sources of encouragement for adolescent book reading, students were asked the question “Who encourages you to read? You may choose as many as you like.” Student responses to this question are recorded below:

#### **Fig.2. Sources of encouragement for adolescent readers**

**(INSERT FIG. 2)**

Other sources of encouragement listed by students included siblings, grandparents, other teachers, librarians, aunts and uncles, tutors, and cousins.

It was apparent from this table that few friends provided encouragement to read books, with only 18% of respondents finding their friends encouraging. Mothers (49%) and English teachers (48%) were the most commonly identified sources of encouragement. These findings were fairly consistent with the results of a US study, which found that only 20% of middle school students and 10% of high school students indicated that their friends encouraged them to read (Hughes-Hassell, 2008).

When these statistics were split for gender, as in Fig.3., notable differences emerged, the most significant being in friend encouragement, with 25% of girls receiving encouragement from their friends, and only 11% of boys. While this suggested that girls were

more than twice as likely to receive encouragement from their friends, it should be noted that three-quarters of girls were still not experiencing encouragement from friends.

**Fig.3. Sources of encouragement for adolescent readers by gender**

**(INSERT FIG. 3)**

The original data set could be split differently, this time for reading frequency. For the purposes of analysis, *avid readers* were defined as students who read for recreation more than twice a week, and *reluctant readers* were students who read for recreation less than once a month.

In this split, the most marked difference between the categories was in friend encouragement. As can be seen from Fig.4. below, 28% of avid readers received encouragement to read books from their friends, compared with only 8% of reluctant readers. Avid readers were more than three times more likely to have friend encouragement, though it should be noted that the rate of friend support for avid readers was also relatively low.

This finding also suggested that 72% of avid readers were not receiving encouragement from their friends, indicating that while it appears there was a relationship between reading frequency and positive encouragement from friends, it was not essential for avid readers have this encouragement.

**Fig.4. Sources of encouragement for adolescent readers by reading frequency**

**(INSERT FIG. 4)**

**Friend and Peer Attitude Toward Recreational Book Reading**

Most adolescents perceived that their friends did enjoy book reading. To ascertain the perceived attitude of close friends toward recreational book reading, students were asked to rank their level of agreement with the statement “Most or all of my close friends like reading in their spare time.” Personally enjoying the practice of recreational book reading and deeming it socially acceptable are two different measures that are not necessarily associated; for example, I can think that surfing is socially acceptable, but not personally enjoy surfing. Thus attitude in this instance referred to personal enjoyment of a practice, rather than its social acceptability.

The results suggested that the majority of students felt that their close friends had a negative or neutral attitude toward reading books for recreation, with only 28% of friends perceived to exhibit a positive attitude toward book reading. 43% of friends were perceived to be negatively disposed toward reading books.

As may have been anticipated from the findings about friend encouragement levels, when this dataset was split for gender, as can be seen in Fig.5 below, the findings differ significantly. 37% of girls agreed with the statement “Most or all of my close friends like reading in their spare time” compared with 16% of boys.

**Fig.5. Level of agreement with the statement “Most or all of my close friends like reading in their spare time” by gender**

**(INSERT FIG. 5)**

To determine the position of the peer group toward book reading, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Most students in my class like reading books in their free time,” with the class group acting as a representative example of the peer group.

Results for this statement were more normally distributed. The peer group was perceived to be considerably more neutral, though still slightly skewed toward a negative position, with 23% positive, 35% negative, and 42% neutral responses. While the group may have been perceived to have a more neutral attitude than close friends, this greater degree of neutrality could have been due to students' comparative reluctance to commit to designating a preference for the group, which may have contained widely disparate views, or views unknown to the student.

When this dataset was split for gender, the difference in perception of peer group attitude between the two genders was less significant than for perception of friend attitude. 23% of boys agreed that "Most students in my class like reading books in their free time," with 22% of girls in agreement. 38% of boys disagreed with the statement, compared to 32% of girls. Thus boys were slightly more negative, and girls slightly more neutral, in their perception of the attitudes of the peer group.

It is already apparent from the above analysis that the impact of the peer group and friends were not equal, establishing a firm argument for differentiating between the two with greater rigor. Further correlation analysis revealed insight into the significance of this influence, and whether or not it is equal for boys and girls.

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. That friends will be a more significant influence on adolescents' attitudes than the peer group.
2. That both genders' attitudes will be equally influenced by friend and peer group attitudes.

I used Spearman's Correlation Coefficient to determine the level of correlation between

the items. The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between adolescents' attitudes toward book reading and perceived friends' attitudes toward recreational book reading ( $r_{s[515]} = .339$ ), which represents a low positive correlation (Taylor, 1990). This suggests that for the group as a whole, friends' attitudes toward recreational book reading may have had some influence on adolescents' attitudes toward the practice.

The Spearman's Correlation Coefficient revealed no statistically significant relationship between adolescents' attitudes toward book reading and perceived peer group attitude toward book reading, as  $p = .063$ , and therefore the results could not be considered significant at  $p < .001$  or  $p < .05$  levels. This suggests that peer group influence may not significantly influence adolescents' attitudes toward reading.

When the data was then split for gender, Spearman's Correlation Coefficient revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between adolescent boys' attitude toward book reading and perceived friends' attitudes toward book reading ( $r_{s[238]} = .398$ ), representing a moderate positive correlation (Taylor, 1990), suggesting that boys may have been moderately influenced by their friends' attitudes. In contrast, the relationship between adolescent boys' attitudes and the perceived peer group attitude was not statistically significant, as  $p = .448$ , and therefore could not be considered significant at  $p < .001$  or  $p < .05$  levels, suggesting that boys may not have been influenced by the peer group.

The Spearman's Correlation Coefficient revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between adolescent girls' attitudes toward book reading and perceived friends' attitudes toward book reading ( $r_{s[276]} = .192$ ), and a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .05$ ) between adolescent girls' attitudes toward book reading and perceived peer group attitude toward book reading ( $r_{s[276]} = -.163$ ). This suggests that friends may have exerted a low positive influence on girls, and that girls tended to resist the peer group influence.

These findings suggested that friends had a more significant influence than the peer group, and that both genders were not equally influenced by friend and peer group attitudes. No significant relationship existed between boys' attitudes and the perceived peer group attitude toward reading, and a low negative correlation existed between girls' attitudes and the perceived peer group attitude, suggesting that while boys may not have been affected by peer group attitudes, girls were weakly resistant to the peer group trend. In contrast, the perceived attitude of friends appeared to have a moderate, positive influence on boys, and a weak, positive influence on girls. Thus, girls appeared less susceptible to friend influence than boys, though both genders appeared to be influenced by their friends' attitudes toward reading books.

### **Implications for Educators**

Books were not uncool. As few boys or girls agreed with the statement "It is not cool to read books" (11% of boys and 7% of girls), the social status of book reading seemed to be relatively positively positioned, as the majority deemed it socially acceptable.

The findings that adolescent who deemed books to be socially unacceptable were less likely to read books in their free time, and enjoy recreational book reading, highlights the importance of raising the social capital of books in the classroom. This goal should be facilitated by the current high position of books in youth popular culture, though the manner in which young individuals interact with this culture is diverse. As students are all different, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to student engagement in book reading; teachers have to get to know their students' tastes in order to connect them with books that they may enjoy.

The low levels of friend encouragement being experienced by all readers underpins the importance of exploring ways of connecting students to reading peers. This can be within the peer group, using the classroom as a space for facilitating greater discussion of books, or

beyond it, using social networking forums. Encouraging students to become part of a reading community, where they can enter on their own terms, as tentatively or enthusiastically as they like, can help students to make connections with peers with similar interests. Adding an interactive component to a Sustained Silent Reading program is one way this could be achieved (Merga, 2013b). Connecting with readers beyond the immediate peer group using social networks may also be a ‘safer’ option in some class contexts, particularly where the peer group negatively regards book reading. It is also a significant finding that peer support, while beneficial, is clearly not essential to sustain reading, as less than one third of avid readers have this support.

Findings that boys received lower levels of friend encouragement are reflective of previous research, which suggests that book reading is a less palatable and acceptable pastime for males in Australia, where literacy practices such as book reading are gendered as feminine (Alloway et al., 2002; Nieuwenhuizen, 2001; Nichols, 2002). As the findings of this paper also suggest that perceived friends’ attitudes can have a more significant influence on boys than girls, making books socially acceptable for boys should be a priority for educators. The aforementioned finding that only 11% of boys agreed that books were “uncool” suggests that raising the acceptability of books for boys is a realistic prospect.

The influence of the peer group as a whole was found to be of limited significance, as these findings suggest that it doesn’t necessarily impact on boys, and girls tended to resist it. This underpins the importance for researchers to resist the urge to subsume “friend” influences into more general, broader peer influences without qualification.

There are many ways to increase the social capital of books, and thus increase engagement in, and improve attitudes toward, recreational book reading. Students are never alone. Even when they are sitting by themselves behind closed doors, peers are in the room with them, on the laptop, or Smartphone, and thus peer influence can be highly pervasive.



Reluctant readers could be encouraged to become “connected” readers, increasing communication around books for pleasure. Discussion of enjoyable books should not be limited to “Show and Tell” in primary school. Discussion of books at high school level needn’t be exclusively regulated by teachers’ perceptions of curricular requirements. Students could be encouraged to talk about books in the classroom and on online book forums, situating recreational book reading as a fun and beneficial pastime that can compete with other recreational pursuits. In this way, teachers can “utilize teens’ social relationships to build interest and enthusiasm for reading” (Hughes-Hassell, 2008). Even if close friends are hostile toward reading, students can connect with new friends with similar tastes online.

Teachers can look ahead to future film releases that are tied to books. Encouraging student engagement with future tie-in texts gives students a chance to read *toward* a movie experience, and perhaps get insight into the next big book/film phenomenon. Letting students have input in defining what is “cool” for them is important, as students are all different, and thus they connect differently to aspects of youth culture.

In discussion of the potential for book reading to become more social, it is vital that this paper concludes with a word of caution. Some students who are already avid readers may not *want* to connect socially around books. For some, reading is an intensely private experience. Research suggests that while friend encouragement and support creates a “virtuous circle” for some adolescents, a positive “mutually reinforcing relationship between friendship and reading” (Hopper, 2005, p. 109), other adolescents resist friend recommendations, preferring an independent approach to their reading.

Also, once students are encouraged to go online to connect with books, less book reading may occur as a consequence. Though logging onto a forum can result in a more productive relationship with books, with many forums such as Wattpad and Quotev featuring unpublished works including fan fictions, encouraging students to write as well as read, care

must be taken when encouraging students to move from a book to a computer screen.

Enjoyment of independent reading must remain the key emphasis. The value of post and pre-discussion, reading reviews and ratings, and networking around books is only beginning to be explored, and thus its potential for benefit is still being discovered.

The analysis in this article is limited by numerous factors. The data were not longitudinal, and thus only provides a snapshot of current opinions of Western Australian adolescents. There were few similar studies to draw upon to support methodological rigor. Data collected on self-report scales is constrained by an individual's recall. The analysis only explores the findings from the quantitative data collected from the WASABR. Also, correlation cannot be conflated with causation; while this article describes interesting observed positive associations in the form of correlations, this does not mean that the hypotheses tested are proven. These findings can, however, form a valuable foundation for future research of both quantitative and qualitative nature.

### **Take Action!**

- 1. Encourage students to read for pleasure, and talk about books they read. Provide a safe environment for them to express their ideas and opinions. Students need to know about good books to be attracted to reading them; strategies such as book clubs, brainstorming of good books and book swaps can give books more exposure in your classroom, and thus hopefully raise their appeal.**
- 2. If your students participate in Sustained Silent Reading, consider allowing discussion about books before and after the program. Students should lead the discussion as much as possible, and they should be encouraged to be tolerant and open-minded about each other's genre preferences. No student should be forced to participate in this discussion.**

3. **Have students describe the successful strategies they employ to choose good books; a library can be a daunting prospect for students who have little idea where to begin looking.**
4. **Draw student attention to upcoming films based on young adult texts, and encourage students to read them. You may also need to facilitate access to these texts, and you should familiarize yourself with both the films and the books.**
5. **Connect your students to online book forums that present reading in a positive light and enable them to connect with readers who have similar interests. You will need to familiarize yourself with these forums and develop an understanding of how they work. Visit ‘More to Explore’ at the end of this paper for some suggested forums.**
6. **As boys were more likely to have a negative or neutral friend base, extra attention should be given to connecting them with books they will enjoy. In order to do this, you will need to have students identify their own reading preferences so you can provide welcome guidance.**

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